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CURIOUS CUSTOMS AND STRANGE FREAKS OF THE MOUND-BUILDERS.

BY PROF. CYRUS THOMAS.

The explorations of the Bureau of Ethnology have brought to light some curious customs and strange freaks of the Mound-Builders, a few of which we notice as possibly of interest to the readers of the *AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST*.

The use of fire in connection with burial ceremonies has always been common among savage and semi-civilized people; it is therefore not surprising to find it playing a part in the mortuary customs of the Mound-Builders, yet some of the modes in which it was employed are so singular as to deserve special notice.

In several of the Ohio and West Virginia mounds, where the body buried was wrapped in bark, it appears that a layer of bark was first placed on the bottom of the grave or on the surface of the ground; then clean hickory ashes were sprinkled over this to the depth of one or two inches, the body deposited on these and covered with bark. In some cases the ashes were sprinkled down first.*

In a mound in East Tennessee, where the burials were in little cobble-stone vaults in the shape of bee-hives and the whole surrounded by a circular stone wall, the area within the wall was first covered over with charcoal, and the vaults covering the squatting skeletons built on this.

In a mound of North Carolina, heretofore described in the *American Naturalist*,† was found a stone heap covered to the depth of three or four inches with charcoal, in which were imbedded the bones of three skeletons which bore no indications of heat. An altar-shaped stone heap found in an Iowa mound had been subjected to a fierce heat, while the bones on it showed not the faintest traces of fire.

In a mound of Northern Illinois was a single skeleton; this was carefully covered from the feet to the waist with stone slabs placed

* See statement in Clark's *Onondaga*, Vol. I, p. 50.

† March, 1884.

over it so as to form a roof-shaped covering. Neither the stones nor that part of the body under them—including the right arm, which had been dislocated and placed by the side of the lower limbs—bore any indication of fire, while the chest and head had been almost entirely consumed, the remnants being buried in coals and ashes. In a group of mounds in Northeastern Missouri the burials appear to have been made in this singular manner: The body, or more probably the bones, were partially burned and then with the ashes and wet clay formed into a mass and several of these masses placed in a heap, and the whole covered with stones, or with stones and earth intermingled, to form the mound.

In two instances the bones of the right arm were found stretched out at right angles to the body, imbedded in a line of ashes, though no other indications of fire were observed.

In two conical mounds of a Wisconsin group the burials, which were confined to a central column eight or ten feet in diameter, were made in this wise: First a layer of stones, then a layer of skeletons on these, over these dirt; then another layer of stones, and another layer of skeletons—the whole being covered with earth and stones. Something similar has, I believe, been observed in a Kentucky mound. A strange custom, which appears to have prevailed to a limited extent in Northeastern Missouri, was to place a layer of stones on the ground, on which the body was laid horizontally, the head resting on a large stone, other stones laid on the head, so that the skull was always found in a crushed condition.

In a large mound in West Virginia, which contained one of the so-called "clay altars" similar to those observed in the Ohio mounds, were found the evidences of a very singular burial, which can be attributed only to a sudden freak. Immediately over, but a little distance above, the "altar" were two large skeletons in a sitting posture, face to face, with their extended legs interlocked to the knees. Their arms were extended forward and slightly upward, as if, together, holding up a sandstone mortar which was between their faces. This stone, somewhat hemispherical in shape and two feet in diameter, was hollowed artificially in the shape of a shallow basin or mortar. It had been subjected to the action of fire until burned to a brick red. The cavity was filled with white ashes, containing small fragments of burned bones, probably animal; immediately over this, and of sufficient size to cover it, was a slab of bluish-gray limestone about three inches

thick, which had small cup-shaped excavations on the under side. This bore no marks of fire.

In the same mound (which was twenty-five feet high), some distance above the sitting skeletons, were two skeletons lying horizontally one immediately over and resting on the other, the upper and larger one with the face down and the lower and smaller one with the face up. Precisely the same thing occurred in two graves in a North Carolina mound, but in the latter case heavy flat stones were on the legs and arms. It may be well to state that both these mounds are attributed to the Cherokees.

In a large mound in East Tennessee, which contained the remains of nearly a hundred individuals of all ages, one adult was found buried perpendicularly, with the head downwards. In a North Carolina mound the principal personage was buried in the center of the mound in a standing posture, a stone vault being built up around the body to hold it in position.

In a stone grave in Southern Ohio, a circle of large flat stones, with one end set firmly in the ground, enclosed an ellipse of similar stones with the upper ends leaning inward; within this was a similar ellipse, the upper ends of these rocks leaning outward against the last. The inner one contained several skeletons, and was covered with very large flat stones. The circle was nineteen feet in diameter.

A. NEW MANUAL OF ANTHROPOLOGY.—As one of the numerous branches of anthropologic studies, *somatology* has been probably the last one to arrive at full recognition. Craniology once was supposed to be indispensable for distinguishing races, but at present is regarded simply as an important part of somatology, for the progress of natural science, and especially of the evolutionary theory, has revolutionized this part of science also. To know something about the physical and mental side of man and his races, his body has to be studied and be considered as a whole. But nowadays it requires many scientific and artificial means to make all the observations necessary and a score of preparations to preserve the objects conveying the knowledge acquired. Among the manuals giving full instructions on the best methods of observing is the recent book of Dr. Emil Schmidt, "*Anthropologische Methoden; Anleitung zum Beobachten und Sammeln, für Laboratorium und Reise*,"